

A Healing Mood for Us All

Part I: Images and Perspectives for Early Childhood Educators

Holly Koteen-Soule, on behalf of the WECAN EC Research Group

This article is a synthesis of a conversation among members of the ad hoc WECAN Early Childhood Research Group that was formed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The goal of the group is to serve as an organ that can observe and help distill what early childhood educators are learning as we try to navigate the unusual circumstances in which we find ourselves. Members of the group include Stephanie Hoelscher, Rihana Rutledge, Rachel Turner, Nancy Blanning, Laurie Clark and Holly Koteen-Soule.

In our recent conversation, we recognized that as the crisis continues and schools began to plan for a likely resurgence in the late fall or winter, we are all- children, parents and teachers- suffering to some degree from the effects of the ongoing uncertainty in our lives. We naturally began to focus on how to support the children and their families in their healing and quickly realized that we also need to check in with ourselves. We realized that we need to acknowledge the spectrum of feelings that we have experienced and to rebuild our inner forces, in order to be able to be fully present for the children and their families when we meet them again in the fall.

The situation that we are facing now and will be facing in the coming school year is full of challenges. Some of them are technical and logistical, while others are questions of priorities, values and integrity. How much can we stretch ourselves? How much should we stretch ourselves?

One of the members of our research group characterized the situation as a “Yes, and...” situation. Yes, this is incredibly difficult , AND we need to find a way to find our serenity in the storm. Accepting where we are, what is happening and affirming our capacity to be present, even in discomfort and danger, is strengthening. Acknowledging this is a good place to start healing.

Healing comes from many sources. We are all well aware that everything we do in Waldorf early childhood education has a healing element. Our WECAN hub is a rich treasure trove of examples. Our emphasis on predictable rhythms and a breathing balance between polarities can be as helpful to us as it is to the children. Especially potent are the healing images and stories that have been offered. We teachers need these as well.

One of our members cited the importance for her of the story of Parsival. Through years of wandering, searching, trials and travails, Parsival finally awakens enough to the other to take compassionate interest in the wounded Amfortas. He asks at last, “What ails thee?” This was the question that opened the possibility for healing. In our current situation, we are warned to not reach out with physical touch toward others, yet we can reach out with our warm interest. Our spatial distancing requirements still afford the opportunity to reach out with our interest to

know the other. “What is your life? What is your pain? I want to feel with you so that I can understand, so we can be companions.” This applies to the work with our colleagues as well as with our families.

While certain aspects of our work are healing for both us and the children, the unique circumstances that we find ourselves in call for a heightened awareness on our part. One member of our group offered the image of “fishing.” For her, fishing means patiently waiting with one’s line in the water- waiting, watching, and sensing- for what is best for the children. The caveat is, of course, that we approach “fishing” with unselfish intentions. It is interesting to note that Amfortas was also called “The Fisher King.”

Another colleague brought the picture of the current situation as a process of purification. For her, each of us is like a point on the periphery of the Waldorf Early Childhood movement as a whole. The situation (like the point and periphery meditative exercise) is dynamic, not static. Some of us may find ourselves taking a step towards what we see as the center, while others may choose to step towards what they sense as the periphery. The guiding question is, “What is essential?” for me as an individual. The same question is being asked by the movement as a whole. “What is the essence of Waldorf early childhood education?” There is a clear appreciation for the importance of working with this question, both individually and together as colleagues, and for the measure of intensity and creativity with which we are being called on to do so.

Another member of our group commented on the likelihood of our movement being tested again and again. In her view, our task is to build up the requisite immunity without losing our humanity. She echoed an earlier colleague’s test for herself: “Can the children feel my devotion, even if I am wearing a mask?” We reminded ourselves of the struggles of humanity’s great leaders and the inspiring efforts of individuals who created new initiatives out of anthroposophical insights, both past and present. In his time, Rudolf Steiner has to persist against many negative influences. Waldorf education and the other initiatives were not easily won.

If we were to look for a common thread in the conversation, perhaps it is the quest to find a dynamic balancing point between polarities: between stretching and standing firm, between the self and the other, between surrender and action, between past and future, between listening and acting, between knowing and not knowing. We do not know what is coming towards us, but we do know that our inner life is a place where we can build up a sense of certainty and trust. We are grateful our work together and these imaginations and perspectives that can, hopefully, strengthen us for our chosen tasks.

